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“The Pardoner’s Tale” and  
“Der Dot im Stock”

WALTER MORRIS HART

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“THE PARDONER’S TALE” AND “DER DOT IM STOCK”

Clouston, in his discussion of analogues of *The Pardoner’s Tale*,<sup>1</sup> refers to the *Meisterlied* and *Fastnachtspiel* of Hans Sachs, and there is a similar reference in Skeat’s Notes on *The Pardoner’s Tale*. Stiefel, in one of his articles on the sources of Hans Sachs,<sup>2</sup> points out some of the striking resemblances between Sachs and Chaucer, and there is some further discussion in Creizenach’s *Geschichte des neueren Dramas*.<sup>3</sup> Curiously enough, however, no one, so far as I know, has sufficiently emphasized the importance, for Chaucer students, of Sachs’s play, nor shown that it is, as a matter of fact, the nearest surviving relative of Chaucer’s version. Sachs, as Stiefel says,<sup>4</sup> was in the habit of finding material for his *Fastnachtspiele* in sermon-books and in German translations of *fabliaux*, and it is, of course, quite possible that Chaucer made use of a similar source.<sup>5</sup> *Der Dot im Stock* may, then, be of the greatest significance, as throwing some light on the nature of the material which Chaucer turned to gold.

The Pardoner, as everyone remembers, chose to satisfy the conflicting demands, of the Host, for som mirthe or japes, and of the gentles, for som moral thing, by preaching a typical sermon, illustrated by a tale.

‘Lordings,’ quod he, ‘in chirches whan I preche,  
I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche,  
And ringe it out as round as gooth as belle,  
For I can al by rote that I telle.  
My theme is alwey oon and ever was—  
“*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*.” (vss. 329 ff.<sup>6</sup>)

He began with an account of a company of young folk in Flanders who “haunteden folye,” but he broke off to preach a sermon against the three vices of gluttony, gambling, and profanity. This sermon

<sup>1</sup> Chaucer Society, *Originals and Analogues*, 434.

<sup>2</sup> *Germania*, XXXVI, 51.

<sup>3</sup> III, 308.

<sup>4</sup> *Germania*, XXXVII, 219.

<sup>5</sup> Although the story has not been found in any mediaeval sermon or story-book. See Clouston, *Originals and Analogues*, 417.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also vs. 426.

finished, he took up, once more, his tale, but with his company of young people now suddenly reduced to three revelers. Early one morning, these three, seated, as was their wont, in the tavern, heard the sound of a bell carried before a corpse. The body, they learned, was that of one of their old companions, slain by "a privee theef, men clepeth Deeth." Immediately they determined, with many oaths, upon revenge, and, plighting their troth to live and die each for the others, they set out to slay Deeth, which that so many sleeth. At a stile not far from the tavern they met an old and poor man, who greeted them meekly. The proudest of the three revelers answered him roughly:

What, carl, with sory grace!  
Why artow al forwrapped save thy face?  
Why livestow so longe in so greet age? (vss. 717 ff.)

The old man replied that no one would exchange youth for his age, and that death would not take his life. He reproved their lack of the courtesy due the aged, and begged leave to go his way. "Not," cried the second gambler, "until you have told us of this false traitor Death."

Tel wher he is, or thou shalt it aby,  
By god, and by the holy sacrament!  
For soothly, thou art oon of his assent,  
To sleen us yonge folk, thou false theef! (vss. 756 ff.)

The old man thereupon directed them to an oak standing in a grove near by. Thither they ran and there they found

Of florins fyne of golde y-coyned rounde  
Wel ny an eighte busshels, as hem thoughte. (vss. 770 f.)

The worst of the three revelers at once proposed that two of them should guard the treasure, while the third, chosen by lot, should run to the town and secretly fetch bread and wine. The lot fell upon the youngest. During his absence the others plotted to stab him on his return, in order to divide the gold into two, instead of into three, parts. He, meanwhile, permitted his imagination to dwell upon the beauty of the florins, and to draw a pleasant picture of the life that he could lead if all were his. Thereupon he went to an apothecary and asked for



Som poyson, that he mighte his rattes quelle;  
 And eek ther was a polcat in his hawe,  
 That, as he seyde, his capouns hadde y-slawe,  
 And fayn he wolde wreke him, if he mighte,  
 On vermin, that destroyed him by nighte. (vss. 854 ff.)

Then he procured three large bottles, put the poison into two of them, and filled all three with wine. Upon his return his two companions slew him, as they had planned, drank of the poisoned wine, and died.

But, certes, I suppose that Avicen  
 Wroot never in no canon, ne in no fen,  
 Mo wonder signes of empoisoning  
 Than hadde thise wrecches two, er hir ending. (vss. 889 ff.)

Nearly two hundred years later (August, 1555), Hans Sachs dramatized a similar tale for one of his *Fastnachtspiele*, *Der Dot im Stock*.<sup>1</sup> An angel speaks the prologue, explaining that this is to be an "*erschrocklich peyspiel*" of how through covetousness three murderers slew one another. A hermit (*Waldbruder*) "get ein an einem stecklein, dregt ein paternoster, spricht:

"Ich pin hewt lang im wald vmdreten,  
 Mein degliche tagzeit zw petten,  
 Wie ich das trieben hab vil jar.  
 Von der welt abgeschieden gar  
 Hab ich got dint in allen sachen  
 Mit vasten, petten vnd mit wachen,  
 Mit vil kestigung vnd hart liegen.  
 . . . . .  
 Hab mich gleich müed im wald vmbgangen.  
 . . . . .  
 Da secz ich mich, ich merck gar wol:  
 Dieser stock ist inwendig hol.  
 Ich wil aufsten vnd schawen nein,  
 Was darin mag verporgen sein.  
 Da ligt ein schacz; pehüet mich got!  
 Warhaft steckt darinen der dot,  
 Wan Salomon sagt, das reichtümb  
 Seim herren oft zv schaden kümb." (vss. 19 ff.)

For a moment he is tempted, then flies from temptation.

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Goetze, in *Werke von Hans Sachs*, VI, 95 ("Neudrucke deutscher Litteratur werke," Bde. 60-61).

Three murderers enter. Their conversation, strewn with oaths, reveals their way of life. They have had bad luck of late and have been hard pressed by the officers of the law. But the first, Dismas, declares that he fears nothing so long as his mother lives, for she is a magician and can keep him out of prison; and, as for the next world, there is, he declares, no heaven or hell, no god or devil; we all die like cattle. At this the third murderer, Jesmas, protests. He fears the law and thinks that they should leave that wood; and he fears the day of judgment and the life to come. Now they see the hermit running fearfully. Dismas proposes an attack; Jesmas protests on account of the old man's manifest poverty. Barrabas, the second murderer, answers (here as elsewhere) these protests. Dismas speaks to the hermit:

Alter, wan her? peschaide mich!  
 Warümb schawst so oft hintersich? (vss. 143 f.)

He replies that he has seen death in the stump. Dismas answers that it is death for him. He begs for his life, but they strike him down, and he declares that God will avenge his death upon them. Dismas discovers the treasure in the stump, "pey dawsent guelden rot." He suggests that they draw lots to see who shall go to the town for bread and wine. The lot falls upon Jesmas. His conscience is troubled, and he fears the old man's curse. As soon as he has gone, Dismas suggests killing him to prevent his betraying them. Barrabas agrees, and calls attention to the advantage of dividing the treasure into two, rather than three, parts. They swear to keep faith in one another, and go out to see if the hermit had not some gold about him. In their absence Jesmas returns. He explains to the audience that he has poisoned the wine, and affirms that it will be a good deed to rid the world of his two companions; moreover, the treasure will be his, and he can live happily—and piously—ever after. But Dismas and Barrabas now return, accuse him of informing, and declare that he must die. After his death they eat and drink, and make plans for the future. But suddenly, "Dismas . . . grewft vnd reipt sein pruest vnd spricht:

"O gsel, wie üebel thüet mir grawen  
 Vnd thüet mich gleich ein frost an stosen!



"Barrabas rüemfft sich auch vnd spricht:

"Vnd mir auch; hab dir die franczosen!  
Wie wirt mir so eng vmb das hercz!  
Mein ganzer leib pidmet vor schmercz.  
Mich dünkt, es grewff mir nach dem leben.

"Dismas . . . . . stet auff, get lancksam, spricht:

"Wie sint mein schenkel mir so schwer!  
Kan nit mer auf den füesen sten!  
Mir wil geleich die sel ausgen. (vss. 288 ff.)

"Er felt nider sam dot."

The angel speaks the epilogue to the effect that "Wan geicz ist ein wurczl aller süent," as St. Paul says.

Between Hans Sachs's version and Chaucer's certain points of resemblance will be apparent:

1. The conception of the Hermit—old and weary, at least, in S., though, manifestly, not immortal, as in C. (In *C.N.A.*<sup>1</sup> he is "un romito . . . . che era assai affaticato.")

2. His treatment by the leader of the three—which does not, indeed, go beyond rough speaking in C. (In *C.N.A.* they accost him simply, ask him to show them where Death is, and call him a fool when they see the treasure.)

3. The old man's protest. (Not present, of course, in *C.N.A.*)

4. The position of the treasure—in a hollow tree in S., under an oak in C. (In *C.N.A.* it is in "vna grandissima grotta.")

5. The nature of the treasure—gülden in S., florins in C. (In *C.N.A.*, it is "molto oro" simply.)

6. The conception of the two groups of murderers as profane, blasphemous, and of an evil way of life. (In *C.N.A.* they are not characterized at all.)

7. The conception of the characters of the three. In each case one is clearly the leader, the most wicked, the originator of the ideas. The second is neutral, easily led. The third, who goes to the village for bread and wine, is younger, perhaps less evil than his companions. In S. he protests against the leader's blasphemy, against killing the hermit, has conscientious scruples and fears.

<sup>1</sup> I.e., in the story in the *Cento Novelle Antiche*, reprinted in *Originals and Analogues*, 132 ff.

In C. he manifests his inexperience in overdoing his explanations to the apothecary. (In *C.N.A.* the characters are not differentiated.)

8. The vows of brotherhood—in S., the two, after the departure of the third murderer; in C., all three revelers. (No vows in *C.N.A.*)

9. They let chance decide who shall go to town—by dice in S., by lot in C. In both the youngest is chosen. (In *C.N.A.* the second murderer proposes the plan simply.)

10. The order of the narrative—in both S. and C. the account of the third murderer's plot follows the account of the plot of the other two. (This order is reversed in *C.N.A.*)

11. The moral. The Angel's "Wan geicz ist ein wurczl aller süent" is obviously a translation of the Pardoner's text: "Radix malorum est cupiditas." (In *C.N.A.* this does not occur.)

12. The two murderers' dramatic account of their sufferings, in S., suggests C.'s reference to the "wonder signes of empoisoning" which "hadde thise wrecches two ere hir ending." (In *C.N.A.* there is no reference to the nature of their sufferings.)

Manifestly Sachs's and Chaucer's versions are much more closely related to one another than is either to their nearest common relative, the version in the *Cento Novelle Antiche*. It is no part of the present purpose to make once more the comparisons with the other versions. For these the reader is referred to Clouston's article<sup>1</sup> and to Professor Canby's.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Originals and Analogues*, 129 ff., 415 ff., 544 ff.

<sup>2</sup> "Some Comments on the Sources of Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale," *Modern Philology*, II, 477 ff.



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